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RUSSIA: Urals religious freedom like "football with only one set of goalposts"

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Religious freedom in the Urals varies widely, even from village to village, restrictions being most common on public events with an evangelical purpose, Baptist and Pentecostal leaders have recently told Forum 18 News Service. Some local officials are very supportive of such events, and also of social care projects such as anti-drug initiatives, but one pastor estimated that over 50 per cent of local officials are hostile to any event run by Protestants. One local religious affairs official told Forum 18 that the problem is that churches have poor legal knowledge and said that his office is "open to dialogue". But a former religious affairs official told Forum 18 that close relationships between higher level politicians and the Moscow Patriarchate stopped lower officials working with Protestant churches. "Even if they could really do with a social project, they know that an Orthodox priest will kick up a fuss, and no fool would risk his career by being linked with support for a Protestant church."

The degree of religious freedom fluctuates wildly throughout the Urals area – even from village to village - Protestant leaders in Tyumen and Sverdlovsk [Yekaterinburg] regions (approximately 1,500km or 930 miles east of Moscow) have recently told Forum 18 News Service.

The most common restrictions concern evangelisation. "It's like playing a game of football with only one set of goalposts," the Pentecostal pastor of Tyumen Christian Church, Leonid Brodovsky, remarked to Forum 18 on 22 July. While, for example, there was no obstruction to a group of Ukrainian and US citizens taking part in the church's recent annual rural mission, he said, the Pentecostals were refused permission to rent venues for the project in half the villages they visited.

Legally, Brodovsky explained, a religious or other social organisation need only notify the relevant state authority about a forthcoming public event of this kind, but in practice permission is required - and lower level officials often demand to see approval from higher instances before granting it. Tyumen Christian Church - an affiliate of the Russia-wide Pentecostal union headed by Sergei Ryakhovsky - usually agrees its plans for public evangelisation events beforehand with Sverdlovsk's regional religious affairs official, Aleksandr Gradusov, said Brodovsky. But on this occasion, he continued, Gradusov declined to sign the proposals, saying that the church should obtain permission from each individual local authority. "And when we try to go ahead without his signature, village officials say that this is a violation, that we need approval from above."

Speaking to Forum 18 on 23 July, Aleksandr Gradusov maintained that the village evangelisation project had "all been agreed" with the state organs concerned and had gone ahead without incident.

In the city of Tobolsk (200km or 125 miles north-east of Tyumen), Pastor Aleksandr Lepyokhin told Forum 18 on 21 July that local officials do not block members of his "Word of Life" Baptist Church from preaching in villages. "But we don't go en masse, evangelisation normally happens on an individual basis," he remarked. In autumn 2003, however, as part of the "There Is Hope" Russia-wide evangelisation project, the church planned widespread public showings of a film exploring the different attitudes of two mountaineers, one believer and one non-believer, said Lepyokhin. Even though the Baptists supplied an Education Ministry letter approving "Ascent" for screening in its institutions, he added, local department officials refused them access: "They just said they didn't want anything to do with us." The Baptists were able to show the film, Lepyokhin told Forum 18, but only in a few venues – their own church building, a cinema and an art institute with whom they already had good relations.

In the asbestos-mining town of Asbest (55km or 20 miles north-east of Yekaterinburg), Forum 18 News Service spoke on 18 July with Pastor Andrei Berdishchev of "Love of Christ" Pentecostal Church, whose 30 registered communities throughout Sverdlovsk region are affiliated to the Russia-wide Pentecostal union headed by Pavel Okara. Berdishchev reported that "Love of Christ" also sometimes faces obstruction to its evangelisation initiatives, such as when police recently halted an open-air village event for which the church had given the local authorities prior notification: "They claimed that permission was required." Due to the personal antipathy of individual officials, said Berdishchev, the authorities in some towns do not permit the church to rent state premises for outreach projects, "even anti-drug initiatives." He added that the opposite could also be the case: "The head of one local village council addressed our tent evangelisation meeting and invited us to come and lead Bible study classes." Berdishchev estimated, however, that the attitude of local officials to the church was negative in over 50 per cent of cases.

In Tyumen city, Pavel and Marina Gailans of "Greater Grace" Evangelical Church told Forum 18 on 21 July that they regularly conduct street evangelisation without impediment. "If police officers approach us we explain that we are a registered religious organisation acting in accordance with the aims of our charter," they remarked. Back in 1995, continued the Gailans, the church's US founder Michael Walsh was constantly refused permission for street evangelisation in Tyumen, "so he just stopped asking and there were no further problems." In their view, obstacles appear only if churches try to stage large-scale events attracting a lot of attention. Since they were able to rent a cultural centre for a one-off evangelisation initiative in May 2004, the Gailans also suggested that it was easier to hold such events inside a building.

Sverdlovsk [Yekaterinburg] regional religious affairs official Aleksandr Gradusov maintained to Forum 18 that religious organisations require permission in order to hold events in public places or to hire state-owned cinemas and cultural centres. Adding that such permission should first of all be obtained at the lowest level, he also complained that religious organisations "poorly know the law." Tyumen Christian Church, for example, holds services at a location different from that where they are officially registered, said Gradusov, and pastors rarely consult with his department, even though it is "open to dialogue."

In Asbest, Pastor Andrei Berdishchev explained to Forum 18 that state officials' refusals to permit church events are always verbal and in the form of practical excuses. "The building we want to rent is under repair, for example, or we are told to see an official who is on holiday." In Tyumen, Pastor Brodovsky testified to a similar response. "We are never refused as a 'sect', but are told that a building is already being used at the time we want it, say." As part of Tyumen region's sixtieth anniversary celebrations this year, Brodovsky told Forum 18, his church proposed an anti-drugs initiative, "but we were told that the programme was already full."

Even though "the law is on our side" according to Pastor Berdishchev, it is thus impossible to challenge rejections legally, which in any case would prove likely to hamper future relations with the state authorities. Citing the recent disruption by an alleged terrorist threat of a Protestant stadium event in Tyumen (see F18News 16 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=300), Berdishchev also suggested to Forum 18 that it was easy to thwart a church's insistence on exercising its lawful rights. He maintained that lower level officials were generally reluctant to take decisions in accordance with the law. "A mayor only does so if the governor approves, and so on downwards. If you cite the law he says that it was drawn up far away in Moscow, and that he will be left with the consequences [if he implements it]."

Sverdlovsk regional religious affairs official until early 2004, Tatyana Tagiyeva confirmed to Forum 18 on 18 July that state representatives would refuse Protestants permission to hold events for "any reason other than that they are a 'totalitarian sect' – they have got wise." The close relationship between higher level politicians and the Moscow Patriarchate was what prevented lower officials from working with Protestant churches, she maintained. "Even if they could really do with a social project, they know that an Orthodox priest will kick up a fuss, and no fool would risk his career by being linked with support for a Protestant church."

For more background information see Forum 18's religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=116

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<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY